

“Building Democracy”

By U.S. Ambassador Charles P. Ries

“To Vima”

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Athens -- Today, Iraqis will exercise their right to vote in free elections. They will take the first decisive step toward building the free, democratic society that the vast majority of Iraqis desire. In polling stations across Iraq, in Europe, the U.S. and around the world, Iraqi citizens will cast ballots. After a 30-year nightmare of repression and torture, the people of Iraq will begin taking charge of their own lives and futures.

The elections will be a historic moment for the country and the region as a whole, and the support of the international community remains essential to make this election a success. The U.S., the EU, and Japan, have pledged financial support for these elections, because we understand how important they are to assist Iraq toward becoming a democratic nation.

The Iraqi people are demonstrating their determination to build a new future for their country. More than 14.5 million people have registered to vote, and 111 political entities composed of 7,500 candidates have registered to compete in today's national elections. From start to finish, these elections are being run by Iraqis, for Iraqis. They will elect a 275-member Transitional National Assembly that will draft Iraq's new constitution and oversee subsequent elections for a permanent government.

The stakes are high and clearly understood by everyone. There is a relatively small group of Iraqis and foreign fighters who are not happy about the prospect of democracy, and who are using murder and intimidation to terrify citizens into staying home. Their goal is to terrorize the population and derail the electoral process. Palestinians and Afghans, however, recently taught us something about how deep the desire for self-governance and a better future can run. Both groups rejected predictions that voters would stay home because of security concerns or terrorist coercion. Instead, they showed up to vote in

compelling numbers to select candidates who they hope can lead them toward peace, stability and prosperity.

As Iraq goes to vote, people everywhere can take heart in the courage shown each day by ordinary Iraqis. These are the people who continue to get up and go to work for a better future. They are the people who stand in line to become police officers and national guardsmen, despite the fact that their colleagues have been abducted and murdered. They are the people who drive to their offices, past the same checkpoints at which suicide bombers struck and killed the day before. They are the Iraqis who care for orphaned children, rebuild sewers and electrical stations, lay new roads, teach in schools and work for a brighter future. As they seek to realize their hopes and aspirations for a better Iraq through elections, they deserve the world's respect and support.

Building the democracy desired by a large majority of Iraqis will require persistence and patience. If the Iraqi people have the courage to move forward and cast their ballots for a democratic Iraq, then we in the West must show the same resolve, supporting their effort as they take on the next challenge in their transition to democracy.

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